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THE BURNING OF JEREMIAH'S ROLL.

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Judah's dark period of social and religious life—Josiah's good efforts in vain—Jehoiakim's wickedness—The two forces in the struggle between righteousness and evil—Jeremiah and his enemies—The king's evil plan—Baruch, the faithful scribe, reads the scroll—The king reading it throws it into the fire—His speedy punishment.

DAYS of tragedy were now on. Israel had passed away under the rod of Assyria's power B. C. 722, and Judah was nearing its crisis. Good and bad in national life were about to grapple as if in final combat. Judah was a "sick man" in the East. Violence and oppression were rampant. Covetousness and luxury had sown germs of rapid and irremediable decay. Jerusalem had been "filled with innocent blood." Profanity, adultery, and sodomy cursed the land. Debauched princes, false prophets and renegade priests were leading the people to ruin. Formal religion as an antidote for evil had proved a crying failure. Wizards and familiar spirits, resort to teraphim and idol-worship were doing their worst, but not saving. The cruel reign of Moloch, with his victims passing through the fire, could not arrest impending doom. Incense was "burned unto Baal, the sun and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the hosts of heaven." It was a dark period of social and religious life in Judah. Since the days of good king Hezekiah, the kings and people had gone almost steadily downward. Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, had begun at once to undo the good his father had done, and to fill Jerusalem with his abominations. Amon was no better; for "he walked in the way his father had walked in." Will there be any hope from the youthful Josiah, Amon's son? With youthful vigor, the boy-king begins to "purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places and the Asherah and the graven images and molten images." It looks as if there might now be a respite

in the impending doom, and that Judah would be checked in the rapid progress toward decay. The temple is repaired, and the law of Moses, long forgotten if ever learned, is brought to light. Mosaism is revived in the land.

Yet with all his zeal for Jehovah, Josiah had not been able to undo what the evil influence of Manasseh had done (2 Kings 23:26). For some unknown reason, possibly from loyalty to the king of Assyria, Josiah throws himself into the breach between Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt and the Assyrians. Necho was on his way to Carchemish to meet Nebuchadrezzar when the fate of western Asia was to hang in the balances only to fall against Egypt. Josiah met Necho at Megiddo, and Judah's reform king was slain. His reforms are thus to be but a brief reviving before the end. The good people of the land might have had reason to expect good things of Shallum, Josiah's son (Jer. 22:1-12), but three months put an end to his unimproved opportunities. Pharaoh-Necho, by a piece of strategy, imprisons him, and Jehoiakim, another of Josiah's sons is placed on the throne. Speaking of the loss of the last two kings, the prophet cries out: "Weep not for the dead (Josiah), neither bemoan him; but weep sore for him that goeth away; for he shall return no more, nor see his native country. For thus saith Jehovah touching Shallum, He shall not return thither any more." But let his successor beware (Jer. 22:10-13 f.)!

It is now that the most violent struggle between righteousness and evil is about to be waged. Two forces are heroically and violently at work. The one is represented by a great-hearted, God-fearing priest, who against his protest had been drawn by divine power into the prophetic office; the other, by the new king Jehoiakim, the reckless, self-willed, luxury-loving monarch.

Look for a moment at the personal embodiments of these two forces. Jeremiah, "the man that Jehovah foundeth," known and called before he was moulded in the belly (Jer. 1:5), had commenced his life-work from the thirteenth year of Josiah. For three and twenty years now (25:3) he had spoken boldly the word of the Lord, "rising up early and speaking." Jehoiakim had scarcely been seated upon the throne (605 B. C.) when the faithful prophet-

priest makes an effort to guide his steps in the way of righteousness and to hold back the people from their headlong obduracy. "In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, came this word from the Lord, saying thus saith the Lord : Stand in the court of the Lord's house and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I command thee to speak unto them ; keep not back a word. It may be they will hearken and turn every man from his evil way ; that I may repent me of the evil which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings" (26:1 ff.). The words were spoken to a crowd in the temple. The people indignantly resent them ! Mob violence right in the temple court seemed imminent. "Why hast thou prophesied in the name of Jehovah, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant ?" "Thou shalt surely die." They lay hands on him, and drag him before the princes "at the entry of the new gate." They accuse him of blasphemy against temple and holy city. The prophet speaks quietly and unperturbed, "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard. Therefore now mend your ways and your doings and obey the voice of the Lord your God ; and the Lord will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you. But as for me behold I am in your hand : do with me as is good and right in your eyes. Only know ye for certain if you put me to death, ye shall bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and upon the inhabitants thereof : for know of a truth the Lord hath sent me unto you to speak all these words in your ears" (26:12-15). The stroke was masterly, and the effect magical. "This man is not worthy of death," said the princes and the people to the accusing priests and prophets. The fickle mob that had just said "this man is worthy of death," is suddenly turned about. There are present elders who call to mind the fact that in the century before, a prophet, Micah the Morashtite, had made a prophecy similar to that made by this Jeremiah, and that the then reigning king proceeded to seek Jehovah's favor and not the blood of the prophet ! Wherefore Jehovah's wrath had been

stayed. The prophet's life seems for a time secure, through the added influence of his valiant and learned friend, Ahikam (26:24).

The truce is short-lived. Jeremiah does not for a moment weaken. As he has risen up early to deliver his God-given message, he determines to sit up late, if perchance the king and people may hearken and live. He does not forbear even under direct persecution. The people of his own native Anathoth had conspired to put him to death (Jer. 11:21f.); and ever since his life had been "a life-long martyrdom." The prophet was without honor both at home and abroad. The naturally timid and tearful prophet had become a thunderer, and his words "like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces" (23:29). O Jeremiah, how canst thou be so bold? Remember thou dost not speak now in the days of Josiah. Jehoiakim is king. Dost thou not remember that but lately Uriah ben Shemaiah, of Kiriath-jearim spoke just as thou art now speaking, and the king's wrath was so enkindled that he followed the fleeing prophet even to the land of Egypt, and fetched him and slew him, and cast his body in the potter's field (26:20 ff.)? Rememberest not thou the fate of thy brother, O prophet-priest of Anathoth? Nay, even as Judah's sin was written with pen of iron with point of diamond (17:1), so was Jeremiah's face to be like flint and his words like hammers.

The prophet begins to realize more and more that the battle that he fights is already lost, yet with an heroic faith in Jehovah—all the sublimer because he sees he is waging a battle for a forlorn hope—he presses on against the forces arrayed against his message, with the king himself as the heart of the opposition.

The grasping king does not escape the forceful invective of the man of God: "Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice; that useth his neighbor's services without wages and giveth him not his hire; that saith I will build me a wide house and spacious chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it is ceiled with cedar and painted with vermilion" (22:13 f.). "Thine eyes and thine heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood and for oppression and for violence." Therefore thus

saith the Lord concerning Jehoiakim son of Josiah, King of Judah: They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah Lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (22:17 f.).

The king does not face Jeremiah, but one Pashur, son of Immer, chief officer of the temple, filled with wrath, smites Jeremiah and puts him in the stocks. Yet does not the prophet relent or hold back, but still more clearly points to a Babylonish captivity which awaits the headstrong nation (20:1-6). Even now danger is impending. Invasion of Babylonians and their emissaries is certain. Already they are moving along the borders. Drought, distress, and consternation are on every hand. A fast is declared, and public worship at the temple. A new plan is now suggested to the mind of the prophet. The people shall have another chance. They will not obey the oral entreaties nor the thunderings of the prophet. "Take thee a roll of a book and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee against Israel and against Judah. Let them be *written down*, that the people may hear them, and that it may be known in coming years that Jehovah's words do surely come to pass!" Jeremiah calls Baruch ben Neriah, his faithful scribe, and dictates the words of Jehovah concerning the people. "And Jeremiah commanded Baruch saying, I am detained, I cannot go into the house of the Lord. Therefore go and read in the roll which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord's house upon the fast day" (36:1 ff.). Baruch takes his stand at the new gate and obeys the "shut-up" prophet. The words of the roll make an impression. One Micaiah goes and reports to the princes what he had heard from Baruch's scroll. Jehudi is commissioned by the princes to wait on Baruch and get him to bring his roll down to them that they may hear its purport. Baruch obeys the summons and gives the reading to the luxurious princes. They turn pale with fear, and threaten Baruch with the king's vengeance. Though sending him speedily away, they keep the roll and report to the king. Jehoiakim at once demands to see the roll. Jehudi

is sent to the house of Elishama, the scribe, to fetch it from the place where they had stored it. The king sits nervous and irate, in his winter house. It is December, and the chilly dampness of the winter cold bites without. Within, the royal chamber is warmed by the open fire-pan, before which the king and his courtiers sit. Jehudi returns with the roll. He opens it and begins to read. One column—and the king sees his picture! Two columns—the king hears his sins and the impending doom! Three, four columns—and the haughty monarch can stand it no longer, “What? The king of Babylon shall come and destroy this land? Never’ (36:29)! He rises up in a fit of rage, he snatches the scroll from Jehudi’s hand, and with his penknife begins to cut it into fragments. In vain do three of his officers try to pacify him, and dissuade him from his ruthlessness. Blind with rage, he will not hear. A triumphant toss, and into the brasier go the curling fragments! As they burn, the fire in the king’s bosom is even yet not quenched. He dispatches, posthaste, three officers to arrest the prophet and the scribe whose mouth and hand had wrought the hated roll to vex him. But Jehovah hid them.

Had Jehovah first made mad him whom he would destroy? The burned roll is restored (36:28) “and many like words besides.” But what of Jehoiakim? “And concerning Jehoiakim, king of Judah, thou shalt say, Thus saith Jehovah, Thou hast burned this roll saying, What hast thou written therein saying the king of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land, and shall cause to cease from thence man and beast? Therefore thus saith Jehovah concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost. And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for their iniquity; and I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the men of Judah all the evil that I have pronounced against them, but they hearkened not.”

Less than a half dozen years, and Jehoiakim is no more. He had proudly striven for power and pelf, storing up riches not his own, warming his own nest while he disregarded the pleadings

of the prophet, and the threatenings of Providence along his borders. "As the partridge that sitteth on eggs which she hath not laid, so is he that getteth riches and not by right; in the midst of the years he shall leave them, and at the end he shall be a fool" (17:11). Jehoiakim "sleeps with his fathers." A few short years shall pass and Jehoiachin, his son, and Zedekiah his brother, will make vain attempts to preserve the life of Judah; but devastation at the hands of Babylon comes. The words of the scroll are fulfilled; and the land is left desolate, for weary years to enjoy her sabbaths.